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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [AF](#)  
SUBJECT: ABDULLAH'S SECOND-ROUND BRINKMANSHIP

Classified By: Deputy Ambassador Frank Ricciardone;  
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (S) Summary: Afghanistan's political brinkmanship has entered a new round. While Karzai rallies the Pashtun community to vote en masse for him on November 7 and displays no interest in coalescing with rival Dr. Abdullah, Abdullah is edging towards a new precipice in suggesting he may boycott the presidential run-off. Abdullah's expectations, including the removal of Independent Election Commission (IEC) President and Chairman Ludin and Najafi, respectively, are unattainable before the run-off. While the Abdullah camp appears to be desperately upping the ante to reach an agreement with Karzai -- with plum positions for key supporters at stake -- Karzai is increasingly dismissive of reaching an accord, determined to win big on November 7, and has asked us to disabuse Abdullah of boycotting the run-off. We are urging Abdullah and his inner circle to take the high road by competing in the second round, or by reaching an understanding with Karzai to strengthen the future Afghan government's compact with the Afghan people before withdrawing from the race. End Summary.

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Round Two - Abdullah's Turn to Attack the Process  
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¶2. (S) Abdullah advisor Abdul Farid Zikria alerted us on October 23 that Abdullah would hold a press conference the next day to announce that the legitimacy of a second round would be in question unless certain conditions were met. Reportedly, Abdullah would call for the resignations of IEC Chief Electoral Officer Najafi and Chair Ludin to avoid a repeat of the contentious, fraud-ridden first round. Abdullah would also request that IEC staff in fraud-ridden provinces be fired and Government officials be forbidden from participating in the campaigns of candidates. Zikria clarified that Abdullah intended to request, rather than demand, these conditions. Later, we heard Abdullah was prepared to boycott the run-off unless his conditions were met. This latest round of brinkmanship, this time spurred by Abdullah's camp, may be driven by some of his followers' determination to gain plum positions in the new Karzai government. Abdullah has not yet held his threatened press conference, although his campaign advisor has made some of these demands public. Abdullah did not take the opportunity to confirm any intention to boycott the election when he spoke to the London Telegraph on October 25, a clue perhaps that this is not a serious threat.

¶3. (S) French Ambassador Jean Ponton d'Amecourt shared his concern with Ambassadors Eikenberry and Ricciardone on October 25 about the possible boycott. Ponton, who believes that if Abdullah boycotts the runoff, it will break national consensus, told Abdullah that a boycott is an extremely stupid idea. Abdullah reportedly responded that he was frightened by Karzai's efforts to rally the Pashtun vote for the second round and to reduce Abdullah support in the North (Karzai's COS Daudzai's waiting room was packed with MPs

"from the North" when D/AMB Ricciardone visited on October 25, all "joining the bandwagon," according to Daudzai). Ponton informed us that the President of the French Senate will meet with Abdullah on October 28 and try to persuade him to step back.

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Karzai Camp Also Wonders: Will Abdullah Go for a Second Round?  
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14. (S) In an October 24 dinner in honor of CODEL Burr (septel), according to pro-Karzai NDS Director Saleh, Abdullah will not give a simple "yes" or "no" answer to whether he will withdraw from a run-off. "It's like a game show, where you've answered one question correctly, and now you can either take your 'win' and go home, or risk it all to answer the last question," Saleh said of Abdullah's pending decision to bargain or continue towards a second round. Saleh continued, "he wants more prominent people to talk with him: the UN, Embassy leaders, elders, everyone." He predicted Abdullah would make a decision in the next 48 hours. In response to Ambassador Eikenberry's comment that "politically, the clock is working against Abdullah," Saleh assessed "all of Abdullah's options" as "coming to a dead end." He specified Abdullah's suggestion to replace the top four IEC officials as one dead-end option, due to the time restraints of the second round. When Senator Burr suggested Abdullah announce: "I am not going to force this to a run-off, because it is not in the best interest of the people," Saleh countered that that is Abdullah's last card, and he will not play it easily. Hamid Gailani, deputy speaker of the upper house and close Karzai confidant, agreed with Saleh that an Abdullah announcement to back out of the second round must come in the next 48 hours. He said that while Karzai is gearing up for a second round, he would also be amenable to reaching an alternative solution through "discussions" with Abdullah.

15. (S) Polcouns met with Deputy National Security Advisor Shaida Abdali on October 25. Abdali, who said that President Karzai "now believes" that we had no other agenda beyond protecting the legitimacy of the process and the Presidency when we advocated accepting the ECC ruling, asked whether we are making the same points at this point to Abdullah. Abdali said that Abdullah's attacks on the process were potentially extremely damaging and that he expected the international community to talk him out of a boycott. Abdali said that there was little interest in the Karzai camp in reaching out to Abdullah to negotiate a way forward, although the "door is open." He asked what the United States 'wants' for Abdullah; Polcouns replied that we neither advocated a position for Abdullah in a Karzai-led government, nor would we have any problem with it. Abdali said that in his view, Abdullah would do anything to get out of actually standing in the second round, because he would "lose everything" politically.

16. (S) Ambassador Ricciardone spoke to President Karzai's Chief of Staff, Daudzai, mid-afternoon October 25 and recounted our conversation with Abdullah earlier that day. Daudzai said that the Palace thinking was now that a second round victory for Karzai was the preferred option; after that would be a "happy" Abdullah withdrawal, based on agreements on a shared program and government structure; and the last-place option was an "unhappy" Abdullah withdrawal and boycott, which would cast doubt on the legitimacy of the election. He confirmed that Abdullah was communicating with them through Saleh, and said that he would encourage face-to-face talks as soon as possible. Daudzai informed us early on October 26 that Karzai had communicated to UN SYG SR Kai Eide Karzai's willingness to meet with Abdullah, alone. As of mid-day October 26, Daudzai said no Karzai-Abdullah appointment had been set.

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Ambassador to Abdullah: Stay the Proper Course  
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17. (S) Ambassadors Eikenberry and Ricciardone urged Abdullah

on October 25 to back down from his veiled and not so veiled boycott threats, which would cost him political capital and legitimacy and result in a very negative final chapter to his political career in Afghanistan. The USG and the international community would also view this setback with extreme disfavor. The Ambassador praised Abdullah for drawing the support of students and other youth; For his ambition to remain politically viable and useful for the future good of his country; and, for his role in Afghanistan's great democratic step forward, thanks in part to Abdullah's insistence on a second round. Competing in the run-off, or reaching an understanding with Karzai and withdrawing from the race on the basis of a reformist national unity platform, would help realize his own campaign platform summarized in his slogan, "change and hope." It would be unrealistic to expect the resignation of Najafi or Ludin, or IEC reform before the November 7 run-off, but Abdullah could reach agreement on such matters with Karzai for action after either his withdrawal or completion of a second round. Further, just as we had told Karzai that we would not accompany him if he decided to walk off the ledge, if Abdullah took this course of action, we would not be there to catch him.

18. (S) Abdullah appeared to grasp our points, but he was noncommittal about turning off the boycott option. He appeared genuinely perplexed over which course of action to take, wrestling with the competing demands of his inner circle for some sort of reward for their support, and his desire to make a positive name for himself in Afghan history. He complained that Karzai would not meet with him and insisted he is not seeking ministries. Rather he sought Karzai's personal assurances that the Afghan president would stand up and implement a national unity program. Firing Ludin would be a good gesture to prove that Karzai has made a substantial change and could be the price of Abdullah's withdrawal.

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Meeting Advisors: Keeping Abdullah from the Abyss and Karzai on Track  
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19. (S) Ambassador Eikenberry met separately October 25 with Vice-presidents Masood and Khalili and former President Rabbani to hammer home our presidential run-off message of continuing neutrality, our support for the election process, our expectation of a future government that will work for the good of all the Afghan people, and thus0 our opposition to the dividing up the cabinet spoils for the sake of establishing a weak coalition government. He added that our neutrality extends to whatever accommodation the two candidates may reach between themselves regarding a reformist national unity platform, and that we understand that Karzai could constitutionally accede to the presidency in the wake of a withdrawal by Abdullah. However, he cautioned we were not prepared to sacrifice our young men and women for a re-creation of past Afghan governments too weak to present a unifying vision to the Afghan people. The Ambassador pushed back firmly and deliberately when pro-Abdullah Rabbani suggested an interim government was necessary to ensure transparency of the run-off election and when Masood insisted deals would have to be cut along ethnic lines if a Karzai government were to be acceptable. These lines of discussion support veiled threats from the Abdullah camp to boycott the election if the IEC is not overhauled.

- VP Khalili

10. (S) Hazara Vice President Khalili accepted our message, stressing that while he and the entire cabinet had advised Karzai to accept a second round, he thought Abdullah and Karzai should come to an agreement that would allow Abdullah to withdraw. Khalili decried the official corruption at all

levels that has strengthened the Taliban's appeal. He said the Afghan people want a good government and he has told Karzai it will be a disaster for Afghanistan and the international community if Afghanistan does not have a strong, clean administration that includes representation of all the tribes. He wholeheartedly agreed with the Ambassador's suggestion that the next president's inaugural speech include a promise to the Afghan people to rout official corruption, promote good governance, and ensure that the Afghan security forces are capable of providing security for the Afghan people within the next five years. Khalili supported more foreign troops, adding that the Taliban are terrorists and the Afghan government must do its part, with our help, to reform and strengthen itself to eliminate them.

- VP Masood

¶11. (S) Vice President Masood's mantra was ethnic inclusiveness. "Unfortunately," he said, government and politics in Afghanistan are unstable because of ethnic fault lines that continue to play a huge role in the people's mentality. Masood did not equate a "coalition" government with the factionalized regimes of the 1990s, rather, he encouraged a coalition in which all ethnic groups would be included and ethnic tension thus diffused. Professor Sayyaf, he said, was trying to mediate between the two sides and implied that Karzai should be prepared to deal over ministry appointments. He argued that the only way to increase stability to fight terrorism is to increase representation of all (read Tajik) ethnic groups in the government. (Comment: We believe Masood is raising the "ethnic card" simply to convince us to impose a Karzai-Abdullah deal. End Comment.)

- Former President Rabbani

¶12. (S) Former president Rabbani emphasized the necessity of a clean second round and said this would not be possible with the IEC left intact. He suggested that an interim government was necessary until the electoral structures could be reformed. Ambassador Eikenberry stressed to Rabbani that perfection cannot be achieved in any process and should not be expected in this one. The USG fully supports even an imperfect run-off process, and is prepared to defend it again with U.S. blood and treasure. Emphasizing repeatedly that two weeks leaves realistically no time for major electoral reform, the Ambassador said attacking the process now would be the Abdullah camp's equivalent of President Karzai's refusal to accept a second round. He urged Rabbani at this point not to pursue his notion of IEC reform or an interim government, both of which would only damage Afghanistan in the eyes of the international community as well as in the eyes of an increasingly impatient American public. Rabbani concluded in response that, "we will do our best to resolve the problems."

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Comment  
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¶13. (S) Comment: Abdullah's desire to overhaul the IEC is understandable -- we share his concerns. The IEC has already suspended six Provincial Election Officers in the most fraud-ridden provinces and is swapping around eight more. We are also attempting to enforce more rigor in the number of suitable polling stations to be opened for the second round. However, the leadership and structure reforms Abdullah seeks will not happen in the two weeks remaining before the November 7 run-off. At some point soon, we hope Abdullah will realize that he has achieved all he can from his bid for the presidency. He won 30 percent of the vote, more than many of his followers had even expected. And, by insisting that a second round was necessary to preserve democracy and to uphold Afghanistan's Constitution and laws, he gained renown and a place in history. Calling for a boycott would diminish these accomplishments. We are encouraging him instead to take the high road by reaching an understanding with Karzai to strengthen the future government's compact with the Afghan people before withdrawing from the race -- or competing (and

losing), and leading a democratic and credible opposition.  
EIKENBERRY